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ABSTRACT

Changes in the U.S. economy are altering employment patterns, and these changes have implications for workers whose language is other than English. This digest summarizes the existing types of programs that prepare English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) adults for the workplace or help workers whose first language is other than English who are already on the job. First, the meanings of "workplace language instruction" are discussed (pre-workplace classes, "work-centered" approaches, "worker-centered" approaches.) Next, current perspectives on workplace learning are highlighted. The final section of the digest looks at constraints on ESL workplace program development, focusing on needs assessment, assessment measures, participant attitudes and expectations, enrollment management, language choice, financial and organizational support, building coalitions, and decentralization. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (VWL)

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

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Workplace ESL Instruction: Varieties and Constraints

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Changes in the U.S. economy are altering employment patterns, and these changes have implications for workers whose native language is other than English. While the nature and type of English language skills needed to succeed on the job vary according to local employment patterns, many commentators on trends in the workplace see a broad-scale shift to jobs that demand better communication skills and thus assume English fluency, both oral and written (e.g., Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990). Though the extent and impact of such a shift has been questioned (Mishel & Teixeira, 1991), lack of English language and literacy skills is clearly a barrier to many kinds of employment. Hence, many programs have been established to prepare adults for the workplace or to help workers already on the job. Here we summarize the types of existing programs and discuss constraints on program development.

Meanings of "workplace language instruction"

ESL programs including some component designated as "workplace language" are found in a variety of settings and funded by various sponsors. This variety is a key to understanding the nature of instruction provided (Kerka & Imel, 1993).

Pre-workplace classes. Some ESL literacy programs might be more accurately called "pre-workplace." They serve unemployed heterogeneous groups of adult ESL learners who are preparing to enter the workplace. Learners in these programs work on a variety of second language skills, many of them related to interviewing or filling out the forms needed to get a job. Some programs are aimed specifically at training workers for a certain job area or occupational cluster, such as manufacturing or custodial positions. Much of the course material comes directly from the jobs learners expect to do.

"Work-centered" approaches. The usual meaning of "workplace ESL" is second language instruction held at the work site. Goals for such programs generally reflect a competency-based approach, particularly if they have been developed based on an employer's perception of participants' language needs for their positions (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Thus the language structures, functions, and vocabulary are drawn from the work life of the participants and can range from discrete study of specialized vocabulary items, to the more abstract and often convoluted language used in procedures manuals or benefits packets, to the language needed to communicate with co-workers.

"Worker-centered" approaches. A limitation of competency-based workplace ESL programs is that they dwell on isolated second language skills and ignore participants' full social identity, only part of which is constituted by the job held. Labor organizations have been particularly sensitive to the need to take a "worker-centered" rather than "work-centered" view of second language instruction, which includes finding out what workers want to know for their personal lives as well as the tasks they perform in their jobs (Gueble, 1990). Many adult education agencies and employee organizations now favor this more holistic and participatory approach to determining participants' second language needs (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Current perspectives on workplace learning

Observers have noted that, too often, workplace education programs treat workers as skills deficient rather than as multifaceted individuals with strengths to be built on and perspectives that enrich workplace activity (Hull, 1993). While worker-centered, participatory programs value employees as multifaceted individuals, they often retain a focus on functional language, teaching workers, for example, how to interact with supervisors or customers in typical production or service settings when they may already have done so successfully for months or years. Recent research in Britain (Roberts, Davies, & Jupp, 1992) and the United States (Hart-Landsberg, Braunger, Reder, & Cross, 1993) emphasizes the social construction of work-based learning, the interactive nature of human negotiations on the job, and the need to build workers' self-confidence as well as language skills. Advisory committees made up of learners, supervisors, and teachers are one way to assure that all of the participants' needs are being addressed.

Constraints on ESL workplace program development

The type of program and its underlying philosophy, as well as other issues detailed below, affect the course goals, materials, and methodology; time, location, frequency, and duration of ESL classes; and voluntary or mandatory nature of participation. There are many factors for both program developers and learners to consider.

Needs assessment. To discover what skills employees need, most program developers conduct some form of a needs assessment, although the depth and scope of such assessments vary considerably. Explanations of needs assessments and program development abound in the literature. Here we address criticisms of and constraints on needs assessment. One recent criticism is that the task analyses (or job audits) that normally comprise needs assessments are too narrowly focused on specific job skills; needs assessments should incorporate a broader range of knowledge (U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

The time required to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment presents another concern. Thomas, Grover, Cichon, Bird, and Harns (1991) suggest that, at a minimum, six weeks of detailed planning precede a 40-hour course. Such lengthy preparation time is unlikely to be universally feasible, so some negotiation will probably take place. Even with considerable lead time to develop curricula, it is not possible to predict all workplace language needs; flexibility and spontaneity allow for emerging curricula.

Assessment measures. Like other adult ESL and literacy programs, workplace ESL programs face difficulties identifying appropriate language assessment measures, particularly for the job-

related skills developed as a part of workplace training (Berryman, 1993). Program developers need to define appropriate indicators of instructional quality and tailor standards for evaluating participant outcomes to their particular circumstances.

Participant attitudes and expectations. Both workers and employers may demonstrate either skepticism or unrealistically high expectations about what can be accomplished during instruction. Employers need to acknowledge the concerns of employees and their unions, who may fear that job audits could be used to fire or demote employees whose skills fail to match those putatively required for tasks they already perform satisfactorily (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990). Thus, the types of information required for a needs assessment and their uses must be established and known to all parties from the program's inception.

Enrollment management. The recruitment and retention of students presents additional challenges for program developers. Developers need to decide which employee groups to target and whether to make participation voluntary or mandatory. Most practitioners strongly recommend that participation be voluntary. If training does not occur during work hours and at the work site, issues of childcare, transportation, and remuneration must also be resolved.

Language choice. While employers may expect or even demand that English be the sole language of instruction, this is not always the most effective use of instructional time. Recently arrived immigrants and refugees with limited English proficiency may benefit from explanations of workplace procedures and training in their native language. Developers thus must determine whether English, the native language(s) of learners, or some combination is the most effective vehicle for instruction.

Support. Finding financial and organizational support for a workplace ESL program is a multifaceted task. Presently, funding for training primarily benefits professional and managerial employees, most of them college educated (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990). The nonnative English speaker is rarely the recipient of training, except in new-hire education. Support is often short term and comes from a complex combination of public agency, private employer, union, and community-based organizations, and is realized in a variety of forms (McGroarty, 1993): direct payment of costs, subsidies in the form of childcare or transportation costs, or provision of things such as classroom space.

Building coalitions. A major challenge for workplace programs is the creation of a successful coalition among the many parties involved. Second language professionals, accustomed to operating with some measure of autonomy, need to learn to collaborate with employers, employees, and officials in public agencies and unions. Each stakeholder must cultivate an ability to appreciate the concerns and expertise of others. No one of these groups can successfully take on alone the considerable task of designing, implementing, and evaluating a workplace language program (Vanett & Facer, 1992).

Decentralization. No single federal or private educational or business agency coordinates all workplace ESL programs, although the Departments of Education and Labor oversee current federally funded projects. This decentralization makes gathering information difficult for program developers, who must often reinvent the wheel when starting a program if they are not already part of a network of experienced professionals. Even if developers are aware of different programs, the short lifespan of many workplace language programs, combined with the fragile nature of the support coalitions and the often customized nature of specific worksite curricula, hinder efforts to gather information on curricula or program results. To alleviate this problem, several manuals for workplace language training have been published (e.g., Bradley, Killian, & Friedenberg, 1990; Cook & Godley, 1989). Recognizing the problems inherent in short-term projects, the U.S. Department of Education (1992) recently extended the length of its workplace education grants to three years.

In conclusion, development of ESL instructional programs for the workplace is a complex and long-term process. As the national employment picture changes, ESL workplace instruction needs to remain flexible and innovative to serve participants effectively.

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